

MBTA COMMUNITIES

ZONING FOR MULTIFAMILY HOUSING IN ARLINGTON



General Overview

What is MBTA Communities / Section 3A?

The [MBTA Communities law](#), or Section 3A, requires that 177 communities in eastern MA with access to MBTA service, including Arlington, amend their zoning to allow multi-family housing. The goal is to address the housing crisis by encouraging new housing production in close proximity to public transportation. Informed by community input and existing Town priorities, volunteer residents in the MBTA Communities Working Group have developed a proposed zoning district that extends throughout our community from Arlington Heights to East Arlington and encourages multi-family housing in a variety of sizes and price points, near transit, retail, and other services.

How does Arlington's MBTA Communities / Section 3A plan relate to other Arlington housing production plans?

By allowing multi-family housing near transit or services, we can accomplish several goals laid out in the Master Plan, Housing Production Plan, Net Zero Action Plan, Connect Arlington – Sustainable Transportation Plan, Fair Housing Action Plan, Affordable Housing Trust Action Plan and the Community Equity Audit, including:

- Better access to work, services, and other destinations
- More housing closer to the places that we go every day
- Increased demand for retail in walkable neighborhoods
- Reducing reliance on single-occupancy vehicles
- Housing choice for empty nesters, adult children, first-time homeowners, etc.

What does “by-right” mean?

The MBTA Communities / Section 3A law requires Arlington to have at least one zoning district of reasonable size in which multi-family housing (any residential property containing three or more housing units) is permitted by-right. By-right means that a discretionary special permit is not part of the process of project approval. Construction of any new development will still require applying for a building permit, submitting plans, and completing inspections. Individual property owners will have the option to decide if they want to redevelop their property under the new zoning. No property owner is required to change their property or develop new housing.

What does “capacity” mean?

Zoning capacity is meant to measure whether a zone is of “reasonable size.” Capacity is not trying to measure how much new housing will be built. The state’s compliance model results calculated how many homes could exist in the proposed district if somehow every existing home were removed, and if every



For more information about the MBTA Communities process, visit
tinyurl.com/MBTACommunitiesArlington

lot was built to the absolute maximum, and if every home was a 1,000 square foot apartment.

What is zoning? What is a zoning overlay?

Arlington has rules about what you can build where. These rules make up our zoning laws. Our zoning law has two basic parts: zoning that governs possible building uses and zoning that governs the size and shape of buildings in the zone. An overlay zone or district is a zoning district that "lies" on top of the existing zoning. It identifies special provisions in addition to those in the underlying zone. Under the proposal each property would continue to have the existing base zoning, and another new zoning, the overlay, would also be available.

What does "setback" mean? Is a "step-back" different?

A "setback" is the minimum distance from the lot line to a building. Sidewalks are generally public property and are in addition to any front setback. A "step-back" is an additional setback applied to upper stories of a building.

What percentage of new housing will be affordable?

Arlington's current zoning requires that 15% of dwellings be affordable (i.e. income-restricted) in new multi-family buildings with six dwellings or more. There has been significant public support for allowing multi-family housing at that scale in the MBTA Communities districts to trigger affordability requirements. Under Section 3A's guidance, municipalities must provide justification for affordability requirements greater than a rate of 10%. The Department of Planning and Community Development has contracted for the necessary feasibility analysis showing that our current 15% rate is economically viable, and we expect that our 15% inclusionary zone will be acceptable to the State. The proposal from the Working Group also includes incentives for a higher percentage of affordable dwellings.

Will buildings in the MBTA Communities Zone be required to be all electric?

By complying with MBTA Communities, Arlington will have the opportunity to participate in the Fossil Fuel-Free Demonstration Program, which would enable Arlington to require all-electric buildings everywhere in town, including any MBTA Communities Zone. Arlington has already opted in to the Specialized Stretch Energy Code, which imposes the highest energy efficiency requirements available to municipalities and also offers a Passive House pathway that buildings may pursue.

Will there be an impact on our public schools? Do our schools have the capacity for more students?

School enrollment is peaking and is expected to decline in coming years. The Working Group heard from both community members and the School Department that it was important not to cluster a district in the catchment area for a small number of elementary schools. The proposal from the Working Group is spread across all the current catchment areas for the elementary schools and gives the Department flexibility to continue to use buffer zones to manage any future changes in enrollment:

"The efforts of the MBTA Communities Working Group to spread the multi-family overlay across Town will lessen impact to a single school. There is a definite benefit to advance planning for housing so that the School administration has a framework to evaluate the



For more information about the MBTA Communities process, visit
tinyurl.com/MBTACommunitiesArlington

future school-age population and determine long-term strategy.”

“The shortage of housing in Arlington at a variety of price points is one of the things that makes it challenging for us to recruit and retain quality staff, especially for our lower paid positions. Many applicants cannot afford to live in Arlington and are forced to weigh the cost of commuting into Arlington versus the salary offered. Unfortunately many of them decide that it's just not cost effective.”

- Dr. Elizabeth Homan, Superintendent, Arlington Public Schools

Can our existing sewer system handle more residents?

Arlington’s current population is several thousands less than its peak in the 1970s. The Town’s Engineering Department has confirmed that the Town’s infrastructure can support the additional residents that could result from the creation of the MBTA Communities districts. Furthermore, because the districts will likely be on land that is already developed, additional housing will only be created if/when property owners choose to redevelop – a slow process of change that will take place incrementally over the coming decades.

What about traffic and parking?

One of the primary goals of encouraging development near transit and along or near commercial corridors is to reduce reliance on cars, and to make cycling and walking more convenient. By building more housing with convenient access to public transportation and commercial and civic opportunities, we give people more choice in how they get to work, school, shopping, and leisure opportunities, reducing the need to drive for every trip.

What about trees, private green space, and open space?

One of the general principles of the MBTA Communities law is to “minimize impacts to sensitive land.” The MBTA Communities law does not override state or local environmental regulations. New development that may occur within the multi-family district still needs to comply with all applicable state and local provisions. More specifically, there is no public open space included in the proposed zoning changes. Additionally, the Arlington Redevelopment Board has proposed Article 10, which would expand our existing street tree bylaw into all residential districts (including any created as part of MBTA Communities) if approved by Town Meeting.